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Writing Sample

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Excerpt from Twin Fever.

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Brit Bildøen

TWIN FEVER

a novel

(A sample of three chapters from the opening of the book)

Chapter 1

ONCE YOU'VE MET HIM YOU MUST SHINE

Ida walks slowly, very slowly, through the Botanical Gardens. A final shard of daylight steals through the branches and the last leaves on the trees. But it's starting to get quite dark, and the chill has hung there for a long while already, and Ida wants to go a bit faster, but she walks just as slowly. She's thinking about a man she knew who said he was slow, and she let him be slow, and the result was he never arrived. This too has now become lumped with all the things that were slightly painful and slipped away and are now stored, somewhere or other, within her. The much too slow and the somewhat too fast and everything else that didn't go right. They don't take up much space, there's still plenty of room for happiness, and Ida is happy most of the time, everyone knows that. Even now she's happy, even though she's cold and it's almost too dark to walk between the brooding trees. Ida walks slowly through the trees, but her step is light all the same, there's not a lot weighing her down. And she's walked past the yellow house and thought what a pity the cafe's shut now, because it's a nice cafe, and it's lovely to have a coffee in the clearing beneath the great trees, with greedy sparrows hopping about. But you can only do that in summer, now she'll just have to look forward to when it re-opens, even though it's a long time off. And in amongst the trees further ahead she spies something white, and naturally she wonders what it can be. She comes up slowly and soon sees that there's someone behind the hedge. And drawing closer she's certain it's a couple, and a bridal couple at that, although it seems odd for that time of day. But it is a bridal pair, he in a dark suit and she wearing a long

white dress. She of the long white dress sprints back and forth between the man in the dark suit and a camera on a tripod, it looks as if she's taking photos of them with a time-release. She runs to the camera and sets something, then races back to stand beside him in front of the hedge, and Ida can hear them laughing. It must be a strange wedding photo, Ida thinks, because now it's so dark that she can barely make out the people up in the gardens. Perhaps the photograph might come out all right if they had a very long exposure time, but it would be pretty dark and indistinct all the same. She walks, if anything, even more slowly until she's passed the couple and can't see them any longer, only hear that they're still at it, a distant sound of laughter. If she were to get married, Ida thinks that she, too, would want to take a rather special wedding photograph.

Chapter 7

PAIN ISN'T WHAT IT'S CALLED

"Well, Jakob, now you can give us the motto for the day," Ida says once they're seated in the kitchen, each with a mug of freshly-made Blue Java.

"Today's motto is courtesy of Robert Musil, and runs as follows: 'To pass safely through open doors, one should check they have firm frames.'"

"Marvellous," says Ida. She knows that her great-uncle has fought for years to get the Talking Book and Braille Library to record all four volumes of Musil's great work. The day the first tape arrived in the post, she drank a toast with him over the phone. Fully recorded, the talking book lasted sixty-six hours and needed as many cassettes, so it was worth a celebration.

They drink their coffee, and Ida tells her great-uncle about the strange dreams she's had. He listens without comment, but nods his head as he refers to his own, copious dream lexicon. Ida knows there'll be an analysis later. Now she looks out of the window, surprised that the view isn't how she'd imagined it yesterday. The weeping-birch has come on strongly, and even though its leaves have turned yellow, it almost hides the bench and the glimpse of the fjord as well. During the summers everyone was here, a long table had always stood beneath the birch-tree, a long oaken plank with an oilcloth over it for daily use. On special occasions, Grandma would spread one of her white damask tablecloths on the table, and Ida was allowed to run round the garden and pick flowers to scatter across it. Sometimes, when Ida thinks about these celebrations, she tries to call to mind her mother's face, but only conjures up the same features as on the photographs. Her father, too, is there, always a dark shadow, a movement somewhere on the periphery. Ida wonders whether she would remember them better if she didn't have pictures of them. Like the wedding photo, framed and hung up on the wall at home. It's a bad amateur photograph, blurred and colour-faded. Ida has concluded that it couldn't possibly resemble them, that they only looked like this on that one day of their lives... But, who knows? Her mother is swaddled in a sari-like dress, her father squeezed into a suit that looks as if it's made of polished velvet. They're standing on some steps, each clutching a rose and staring deep into one another's eyes. They're about to kiss. Each time Ida looks at the picture, and this she does

often, she thinks they'll kiss the very next moment. Then turn to the photographer and laugh.

That's when he should have taken the picture.

"I suppose we should make a start, Ida," says Jakob.

The coffee mugs are empty and the blood is meandering a little faster round their bodies. They begin in the living room, where the thieves have made the most mess, and where the majority of the old bits are.

"The silver has gone, I'm afraid," Ida sighs when she's looked through the big sideboard.

"There isn't so much as a teaspoon left."

"And the silver tankard?"

"There's no silver tankard here."

"Tell me what's there, then."

"The eggshell china service is here, the one with the blue rim and the little flower inside the cup."

"Porsgrunn. From the Twenties. Write it down and how many there are of each piece," Jakob commands.

And Ida writes in the small notebook she's brought along for the purpose. She writes sideboard first in capital letters. Then she lists the china service underneath.

"Apart from that there's masses of candlesticks and vases."

"The brass candlesticks! I'd forgotten them. Are they on the mantelpiece?"

Ida can't see any brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece. In fact, there's nothing there at all, because the dogs are in the kitchen waiting to be glued.

"Oh, damn it. We've lost those as well, then. That's a pity, they were nineteenth century, English."

"I think I can remember them," Ida says. She sighs, and lays aside her notebook.

"No, no," says Jakob. "We mustn't lose heart now. Which candlesticks were in the cupboard, did you say?"

Ida describes, Jakob labels, Ida notes down. Like this they work their way through the entire sideboard. In the first drawer Ida discovers a beautiful box, upholstered in flower-patterned material. It contains a pile of old photographs and a postcard or two. She puts the box aside, eager to go through it later on. The same drawer holds the damask tablecloths and a

couple of embroidered coffee-table runners which immediately rekindle a dormant bows-in-my-hair, patent shoe feeling.

"I suppose Granny embroidered these tablecloths?" she asks and guides Jakob's hand over the stitching.

"Of course. She embroidered until she hardly had any sight left."

Jakob takes the tablecloth and lifts it to his face, sniffs it.

"Perhaps you could hang the tablecloths out to air, I think they need it."

Ida gathers up all the table-linen she can find, it's a whole armful, and takes it out into the garden. The clothes-line is still there, sagging limply between the house and the birch-tree. There isn't space for all of them, so she drapes some over the bench as well. The large, fluttering pieces of material impart life to the faded garden as they beckon merrily with cheerful, false promises. Some of the tablecloths are embroidered with flowers, and this makes the garden look really summery. Ida saunters around trying to find something fresh to bring indoors. A stunted rose bush by the house wall can still tender a couple of half-open buds, Ida braves the thorns and snaps them off. The taste of blood mingles with the smell of roses as she licks the scratches on the back of her hand. She goes back indoors, a slipstream of fresh air accompanying her all the way to the kitchen.

"Mmm, you smell fresh," says Jakob who's begun to lay the table and get things out of the fridge. "Perhaps we should have lunch outside?"

"But the bench is covered in tablecloths."

"We could take a couple of chairs out."

"And it's quite cold too..."

"Haven't you brought a sweater along?"

Ida laughs and starts loading a tray with crockery and condiments. Then she carries out two chairs and a small nesting table while Jakob makes the tea. Once they're settled out on the grass, it's very pleasant. Ida has brought along the old box of photographs and postcards, and after the meal she lifts the lid and peers expectantly inside. The smell hits her first, as it always does, it's sweet, a mixture of old paper and something less definable. Could the box have had chocolates in it before, or cigars? Ida takes out the entire bundle of photographs and lays it on the table. Then she looks at them one by one and replaces them in the box. There are quite a few postcards, some are old and black and white. A couple are hers, from her time in Germany.

She puts them to one side. The cards from Ulrik are the most exciting, with motifs, stamps and postmarks from all sorts of countries. She reads some aloud to her great-uncle.

"This one's from Tabangao, wherever that is. It looks and sounds rather tropical. *We've survived the cyclone*, it says. *Now we must hope the volcano stays dormant. I've quite enough with my own magma, here in this borderland between reason and absurdity.* It's signed with a dash and a U."

"That uncle of yours thought hard work was all that mattered, but it didn't prevent him from being a true poet."

"This card's rather sad," says Ida struggling to read the postmark. "I think it's from St. Malo or somewhere. *Last time it was crawling with people and dogs here, now there's practically no one about. This place reminds me too much of my own life.* That's all, no signature."

"No, well there it is," is Jakob's only comment.

There are more cards, but Ida begins to look at the photos. Many of them she's seen before, but there are also some that are new to her. Family snaps from years ago, usually taken at some festivity or other out here at Odden. One of her on her great-uncle's lap, one of all the grown-ups squashed up on the bench beneath the birch-tree. Ida pauses over it, here they all are, all those now departed. They're smiling, a little formally, but they're smiling, and all of them except her father are looking straight at the camera. Her father is looking to the side, he's smiling too, perhaps he's looking at me, Ida thinks. Maybe she's gallivanting about in her best frock on the edges of the photograph, she should have been part of it but wriggled off at the last moment?

The next picture makes her start. She must have exclaimed too, because Jakob asks what's the matter.

"Well, this is strange," Ida says.

The photograph in her hand is of two little girls, with identical frocks and hair, and similar ribbons in their hair. They're in front of the gate, one is leaning back smiling while the other is standing slightly closer looking serious. Ida stares at the photo, stunned. The girls are like two peas in a pod, and both resemble her when she was small. She turns it over, and on the back is the faint pencilled legend: Ida and May 1968.

"What is it?" her great-uncle asks again.

Ida doesn't reply at once, she can feel her heart thumping faster, and she's gripping the photograph so hard that a numbing sensation spreads from her arm through the rest of her body. Jakob shifts uneasily in his chair, and Ida pulls herself together.

"This is strange," she says. "Really odd. It's a picture of me and another girl who looks identical. No, it's two poses of me in the same picture. No, I don't know how I can explain it. It's quite extraordinary."

"Perhaps it isn't you, but two other girls, sisters or something of the kind," says Jakob.

"Yes, but it was taken here, just inside the gate. Even my name's on the back! Ida and May, it says, 1968, it's Granny's handwriting, I think."

Jakob is silent.

"Isn't that peculiar?" Ida asks.

"Yes," says her great-uncle. "Yes, it certainly is peculiar."

He thinks for a moment.

"Are you sure there are two of them? It's not a displacement or a shadow or anything? Perhaps it's a double-exposure? That's what it must be."

"I don't think it's a double-exposure."

Ida examines the photograph closely.

"The picture isn't fully in focus, but there's nothing else here that indicates it's a double-exposure really."

"It may still be for all that. Things happen with those old photographs."

"But how do you explain the "Ida and May" on the back, then?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps it says "Ida in May" or something like that. Your grandmother wasn't the best speller in the world."

Ida merely grunts. She's not the least happy with this explanation. Jakob registers the fact.

"Perhaps it was one of the lasses from the neighbourhood paying a visit, perhaps you had a friend here," he suggests. "Though I can't recall anyone of that name," he adds a little hesitantly.

"If so, it seems strange we're dressed exactly alike."

Ida racks her brains till it hurts, but she can't remember this day, this occasion, for all the world. Her childhood memories consist largely of what she's been told, and that's not a great deal, as her parents weren't there to contribute.

"This must be just before they disappeared," she says.

"Yes, if it was taken in '68, it would have been the last summer they were here," replies her great-uncle quietly. "You were about four when that picture was taken?"

"I was four and a half when they went away."

They both fall silent. Ida gazes at the picture and beyond it, wondering if an even larger chunk of her life is missing than she's so far believed.

"Utopians, them as well," says Jakob suddenly, unexpectedly brusquely. "Utopians, every one of them. My God, what a family!"

Then his hand reaches out, finds her arm and squeezes it gently. And his voice changes again, becoming mild as if caressing Ida's brow, closing her eyes. As if I were being laid down to rest, Ida thinks, and feels the tears welling up in her head.

"I've always believed they shouldn't have gone off without you."

Now Ida has to press her lips together too, which in turn causes a couple of tears to squeeze out of her eyes.

"But if they'd taken you with them, perhaps you wouldn't be here now, either," Jakob continues.

"They could have not gone."

Her own voice frightens Ida, there is anger beneath the slight quavering. Something that had set deep within her, begins slowly to rise to the surface. She extracts her arm and begins to clear the table. She knows she'll sniffle soon, but doesn't want to make a fool of herself, and so a couple of clear, heavy drops drip from her nose on to the plates instead. This makes her smile, and then she has to sniffle anyway. She gives her great-uncle's shoulder a quick squeeze before she goes out with the tray.

Chapter 8

LIKE BEING JUST AS CLOSE AND JUST AS FAR AWAY

When they've finished going through the sideboard, Jakob wants a rest. He retires upstairs taking his company with him. The living room seems large and silent, and Ida who usually enjoys quiet, doesn't relish it today. She settles herself in the ornate chair in the kitchen with the portable radio on low, and has planned to do a little work. The bag with her papers and books is within easy reach, but even more to hand is the flower-patterned box, which exudes its mingled perfume as Ida opens the lid. On top of the bundle now are the postcards she sent from Berlin when she was living there and her grandparents were still alive and lived here. *Dear Gran and Gramps*, says a card with a picture showing, of all things, Kaufhaus des Westens. *Hope you're both well. Everything is fine here at all events, although there's a lot to do. The language is gradually getting easier, and I know my way around the city better now. The weather is nasty and wet, hope the weather is better where you are. I'll probably stay down here for Christmas, look after yourselves. Hugs from Ida.*

What a dull card, thinks Ida feeling deeply ashamed. The old folks were waiting for some sign of life, and that was what they got. She turns the other card over, its wording is very similar, everything is fine, but now it's summer and far too hot, more than thirty degrees, and dry. This time she'd bought the card in the National Gallery, it shows the painting *Die Toteninsel* by Arnold Böcklin, she loved that picture. She could stand for hours looking at it, there was such a vast distance between the beautiful, glistening surface and the darkness deep within, she got sucked in and couldn't escape, nor did she want to. She took the little boat across the shiny water, towards the boulder-strewn island, towards the irresistible gate, towards the sougning forest. But no matter how long she stood there, she never arrived, she couldn't manage it, but that wasn't the point. One had to be there as part of the span, and that was enough. Even now Ida feels the magnetism the picture exerts on her, in spite of the poor reproduction on this small card, it's magic.

She stares out of the window and wonders if any other painting has made such an impact on her. Perhaps Raphael's girlfriend, his mistress. *La Fornarina*. She who displays her pale skin and bare breasts and the hint of a smile, an infatuated, earnest smile. Here the darkness emerges from the background, it's not crouching within like a magnet, but forces its way out, is allowed to

permeate the woman's fair skin, the woman who's sitting there out of love. She first saw the painting on a card that came in the post from a good friend. It hung in a smooth, brown wooden frame above her desk for several years. Later on, she came face to face with the painting, quite by chance. Suddenly, it was there before her, on a wall in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome. It was as great a shock as an unforeseen meeting, after many years, with someone you've never stopped loving, or someone you've never met before, but know you will come to love. Ida was totally shaken, then and for many days afterwards. She couldn't keep the card above her desk any more. She lost it, on purpose surely, allowed it to disappear, drift into memory. 'These are the paintings in my life, she thinks and realises she's smiling to herself. 'The two great painting experiences of my life. So far, she thinks and smiles a little more.

She takes out the photograph of Ida and May, one familiar and one unfamiliar, a picture someone took thirty years ago. And Gran had cherished it, amongst her fondest memories, in that most beautiful box. It's definitely me, Ida thinks examining the features of the two girls. 'There's me, and there's me again. Or someone else. But then they're identical? She concentrates, compares. Possibly one of the girls has fuller cheeks, the one who's leaning back against the gate. But could that be because she's smiling? Ida looks at the other girl. 'That's me at any rate, she thinks. For that seriousness possesses her still, she believes she's seen that sullen look several times in mirrors, in shiny window panes. And that gaze, half downcast, half staring. But the other's smile has also been hers, is hers still, perhaps even more now. An open face, an open, laughing mouth that sets the teeth in it free. Head slightly cocked, something independent about her. It's one and the same, but also two different girls, one who's saying yes and one who's saying no. 'There's room for them both in the same picture, that's what's so strange. But one is close, the other far away. At first Ida thought the nearer of the two girls was her. Next moment she was convinced she was the one standing a little way off. And now she's really not certain any more, about anything. She sighs and lays the picture down. Then picks it up and holds it a while and puts it down again. It's a troubling picture, she can't hold it, but can't just let it lie either. Ida sticks it in the window, wedges it fast in a corner so that it stands by itself. The light shines through the photograph making it even less clear. Double-exposure, thinks Ida and isn't sure.

*

LANDLOCKED

ON THE ISLAND

The mattress had been one of Mona's ideas, the trips had been another. They had begun several years before in Antibes where they spent a week at a small hotel in a room facing the blue-green Mediterranean, with a soft wind playing at the curtains and wafting them teasingly into the room. Where the bed linen was changed daily, damp, crumpled sheets were replaced by cool, clean white ones. Everything was bright and clean and white, and the light in the street was dazzling, the water they bathed in was illuminated by the sun-reflecting sand, the meals were long and the food exquisite, everything conspired to inflame their senses, and when they left they felt sure they were pregnant. Anything else seemed unimaginable. Even was just as surprised as Mona when one morning the blood, which had continued on its own imperturbable cycle, decorated their sheets with heart-shaped spots.

After that they went away as often as they could, because they enjoyed travelling, the further away from home they got the closer they grew. But they also went with a certain sense that what was beautiful, what was bright and brilliant and noble, would permeate them, take up abode within them and perhaps remain there. Perhaps it would grow within them into something new. And whether they visited large or intimate cities, places that were hot or just warm, they always found their way to tranquil hotels that had bright rooms and windows where a wind could tease the curtains and fan them into the room. They selected hotels of a good standard, so they could be certain that damp, crumpled sheets would be replaced with cool, clean, white ones every day. They sought out forgotten beaches of fine, light sand, other places had sand that was dark and scorching, or beaches that were made up of round white pebbles that gave to the contours of the body as if they were sand. If they hadn't already settled on smooth little rocks or crumbling cliffs. They always massaged sun cream into each other with languid movements, they often shared a bottle of wine, and bathed at the same time, each with their own book to read.

Every time Even and Mona returned from these romantic holidays, they had a strong sensation that they had brought more back with them than the luggage they were unpacking. They laughed at themselves, but still managed to inhabit this bubble until, a week or two later, it burst. The bubble burst and ran down Mona's thighs in red, wet stripes. And they laughed a little more, at themselves and their situation, and began to plan the next trip.

Perhaps next time they would travel to Rome, where each little piazza that unexpectedly revealed sunlight, fountains and flower stalls at the end of a narrow street, reminded them that life is full of surprises and fresh chances. The bridges carried them from story to story while about their piers the Tiber told murmuringly of everyone who had kissed there before. Or they visited Paris, went from church to church letting the stained glass windows colour their dreams, because they needed more of such colours, and they went to concerts, concerts for violin and piano played beneath high ceilings, and let the music set the tone for their love, because their love needed more of such music. The view from the Eiffel Tower gave them the requisite feeling of giddiness, they thought of all the people who had hurled themselves off it and rushed at each other, Even enveloping Mona in his arms and Mona catching up Even in hers. In Vienna they were certain that the crystal chandeliers in the huge cafés and the Old Masters in the art galleries would command something beautiful, conjure something eternal, cause something wondrous to happen. And as always, the hotels were superior, the rooms were clean and airy, with windows that let in light, rain light or sunlight, and bed linen that was changed every day. They found towns whose darkness hid them at noon and towns where night was like broad day, towns whose distinctive light came streaming into them, into their darkest recesses.

The light from these towns flowed into Even, it flowed into Mona, they presented the light to each other, they opened each other up and delved down into each other with all the light they had managed to accumulate, they searched with light and found light. They made love as if it would be the first and last time, each time, and travelled home, rested but also completely exhausted. Safely back they fantasised, discussed names and whether it was Sofie or perhaps Benjamin who was taking root there in the darkness of the womb, whether it might be a Sæther or a Lurøy, and so they went on until the bubble burst, then they found something else to talk about. Even cushioned Mona's back with pillows and placed a blanket over her stomach to ease the pain, he massaged the nape of her neck and her feet, and still they were happy, because they had each other. (p. 108-111)

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When you look at a house at night, with its lights out, you imagine it's standing guard over those sleeping within. It looks almost as if the house is breathing, a living thing, you might almost think it would bite if you approached, like a guard dog. But then you walk up to it, and it doesn't bite, the house isn't breathing, it isn't keeping watch, it's just there. You can creep in through a window without anyone seeing or hearing you, and you can go up the stairs, and if you are lucky and the stairs don't creak, you can tiptoe unnoticed into the grown-ups' bedroom, and look at their faces which are so bereft of fear, so free from guilt. And then at the frail bodies, their shapes so clearly defined beneath the bedclothes, and they too are vacant, vacated, they lie there like shells, wrappings easily brushed away with a small sweep of the hand, because in reality they are somewhere else. The children's room is next door, their sighs pervade their parents' sleep. You can stand looking at children for a long time, at the tiny flutterings of their eyelids, the twitchings round their mouths, it is easy to dwell on all the awful things that could happen to them, even on a peaceful night such as this. And the child you are staring down at stirs a little, stretches and mumbles something maybe, and you wonder what would happen - and surely something must - if the child were to wake and open its eyes. But the child doesn't open its eyes, it buries its head deeper into the pillow and sighs once again, and you can either stand there a little longer or move on through the night.

In one of the beds Mona pricks up her ears, were they footsteps on the stairs? Could it be Live who's up, unable to sleep too? In the tangle of thoughts that Mona is trying to unravel there is a small thread, a slender one, that she must try to find. The thread has to do with Live, but it is hard to see, hard to grasp. It's difficult to picture Live now, Mona can't see her clearly when she's so close. Just as she finds it difficult to see Even distinctly while they are together every day. But now Even is sharp and clear, shining there right before her in his white collar and white

cuffs, while Live's thin body melts into the shadows about him. Mona worries that Live has got weaker since she came, she tries to remember what things were like during the first few days, the first week. She didn't have that cast over her features then, as if she's in pain but is trying to hide it.

Live has always been considered a mild and patient person, but just recently she has been unusually irritable. Like that evening recently when she and Mona were discussing the bridge, and Live suddenly burst out:

'It's easy for you to be against the bridge when you spend all year in Oslo with roads going off in all directions and there isn't an obstacle in sight!'

'That's true enough,' Mona had replied. 'But surely I can be against it on principle? Against the idea that all the fjords on the coast should be filled full of cement and all the mountains shot through with tunnels?'

'But,' said Live, 'what about all the people who've broken their necks in cars, tumbling into fjords or hurtling into rock faces in the frantic race to reach the ferry?' (p. 126-128)

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